

McCord Changed White House Talks

WASHINGTON (AP) — The tone and focus of White House discussions about Watergate changed markedly after convicted burglar James W. McCord Jr. blew the lid off the scandal with his public charge that higher-ups were involved in the wiretapping raid.

On March 21, 1973, President Nixon discussed with John W. Dean III how payoffs and clemency might be handled for original Watergate case defendants so they wouldn't talk.

The White House has consistently maintained that Nixon cut off on that day any idea of paying money for silence. The White House tape transcripts of this key meeting are ambiguous in many places where Nixon discusses the idea.

But that same day, McCord was delivering to U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica his letter of allegations that Dean, the White House counsel, and Jeb S. Magruder, Nixon's 1972 campaign deputy director, were also involved in Watergate.

The one White House transcript of a March 22 meeting has no reference to payoffs or clemency, dealing rather with strategy on executive privilege and with Dean's assignment to write a report on the affair.

On March 23, McCord's letter was read in open court. He talked to Senate Watergate investigators and within three days his specific allegations were publicly known.

From March 27, the date of the next White House transcript, there is never again any discussion of hush money or clemency.

With McCord's disclosures reheating the case and options clearly changed, Nixon and his aides delved into other strategic possibilities for handling disclosure of Watergate facts, usually talking of ways that would be least harmful to the presidency.

In a national address April 30, Nixon said that as a result of disclosures made to him

March 21 by Dean, he on that day "personally assumed the responsibility for coordinating intensive new inquiries into the matter and I personally ordered those conducting the investigations to get all the facts and to report them directly to me right here in this office."

"I again ordered that all persons in the government or at the re-election committee should cooperate fully with the FBI, the prosecutors and the grand jury."

On April 17, Nixon announced that because of the March 21 disclosures he had ordered intensive new inquiries into Watergate, and said there had been major developments in the case. He also announced then that he had told White House staff members to appear and testify voluntarily before the Senate Watergate committee.

The presidential instruction came on April 17.

The transcript for March 21 shows a different attitude toward the Watergate committee and another view on the grand jury. Nixon said:

"I think I want another grand jury proceeding and we will have the White House appear before them ... I want everybody in the White House called. And that gives you a reason not to have to go before the Ervin and Baker (Senate) Committee ... You can say I don't remember. You can say I can't recall. I can't give any answer to that that I can recall."

The transcripts, like all those released Tuesday, are edited portions of selected conversations, most during March and April 1973.

The White House said the transcripts cover all relevant Watergate discussions on which tape recordings exist.

Nixon has maintained in a series of public statements that while he discussed hush money and clemency for defendants in the original Watergate case with Dean on March 21, 1973,

he told Dean such action would be wrong. The transcript shows that in a discussion of clemency, Nixon said: "... It is wrong that's for sure."

But Dean has testified he interpreted the discussion as meaning the Watergate cover-up would continue.

At the end of a second meeting on March 21, Nixon observed:

"What the hell does one disclose that isn't going to blow something?"

Congressional interest in the case zoomed after McCord talked.

The situation was no longer what it had been on March 21 when Nixon and Dean discussed hush money.

The White House transcripts

for subsequent meetings quote payoffs only in the context of Nixon recalling to others that he told Dean payoffs and clemency would be wrong. On April 17, for example:

Nixon: "I didn't tell him to go get the money did I?"

Haldeman: "No."

The tone of meetings shifted after March 21 from concern that Hunt or Magruder might talk to concern about what Dean might tell prosecutors and to explorations of who might be able to make charges against top Nixon aides H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman.

Said Nixon about Dean April 17: "He's going to do anything to save his ass."